DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 246 CS 217 106

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TITLE (Dis)Located Readers? High School Students Responding to African Fiction.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; *African Culture; *African Literature; Attitude Measures; Audience Awareness; Comparative Analysis; Foreign Countries; Grade 11; High School Students; High Schools; *Literary Devices; *Novels; Reading Material Selection; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Author Text Relationship; Cultural Translators; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A study explored whether high school readers respond significantly differently to African novels in which unfamiliar cultural elements are presented "aggressively" than to those with an "assimilative" presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements. The three novels are set in Africa: Nancy Farmer's "A Girl Named Disaster," Buchi Emecheta's "The Bride Price," and Richard Rive's "'Buckingham Palace' District Six." Two of the authors (Emecheta and Rive) write from their own experiences of living within a particular African culture, and one (Farmer) explicitly translates an African culture that is outside of her experience. Participants, eleventh-grade students from a mainly white, middle-class Canadian suburb, had few life experiences to bring to these African texts, and the assumption was that they would consider themselves "dislocated" readers of these works. Students did a blind reading of the first chapters of the novels and responded in writing to questions of language, voice, and cultural translation, commented on the intended audience, and speculated on the possible relationship of the author to the culture being described. Of the 25 students in the class, 23 suggested that Farmer's book was intended for young adults in Western countries, supporting their opinion with references to the way language is used in the text. Almost all students commented on a contrast in tone and intent between Emecheta's and Farmer's novels, suggesting that the tone of Emecheta's novel was "richer" and "more complex." Rive's novel was recognized as having been written by an insider to a culture--South Africa. Students appeared most satisfied with the texts in which the unfamiliar culture was presented as "normal" and not translated for them. (NKA)

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(Dis)Located Readers? High School Students Responding to African Fiction

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Selecting cross-cultural literature for today's children and young adults poses many dilemmas for teachers and parents. We live, as Simon (1996) suggests, "in a conceptual world from which the conventional stabilities of nation/culture/language/subject have disappeared" (152). Notions of culture as static and fixed have been replaced by ideas of culture as shifting and unstable, a process of negotiation in a borderless postcolonial world. Consequently, contemporary theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Clifford (1988) encourage us to understand cultural identity as a fluid and ongoing process. If we accept such postcolonial perspectives of cultural identity as politically contested and historically unfinished, how, then, are we able in the West to think about literary negotiations of cultures not our own? How does literary quality intersect with questions of culture, language and authorial voice? How can we make value judgments about books that purport to "represent" cultures outside the white European mainstream? In this paper, we consider these questions in the context of a study that explored twenty-five adolescent readers' responses to the opening chapters of three African novels written by authors both within and outside the cultures they describe in their texts.

Our objectives for this study were to come to an understanding of whether high school readers respond significantly differently to African novels in which unfamiliar cultural elements are presented "aggressively" than to those with an "assimilative" presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements (Tymoczko, 1999, p. 21). According to Tymoczko:

> An author can choose a fairly aggressive presentation of unfamiliar cultural elements in which differences, even ones likely to cause problems for a receiving audience, are highlighted, or an author can choose an assimilative presentation in which likeness or 'universality' is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work. (p. 21)

Tymoczko suggests that texts where "difference" rather than "universality" are highlighted may cause problems for the receiving audience (p. 21). However, literature is also a means by which readers may acquire new perspectives, and multicultural literature has the potential to create what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space" for cultural negotiation.

Tymoczko (1999) likens the work of post-colonial authors to the work of translators: rather than translating between languages, post-colonial writers are translating between cultures (p. 20). Part of the post-colonial author's task is to choose "which cultural elements to attempt to transpose to the receiving audience" (Tymoczko, 1999, p. 21). It is also the author's task to decide *how* to "transpose" these "cultural elements." Each of the three novel excerpts is set in Africa, two of the authors (Emecheta and Rive) write from their own experiences of living within a particular African culture and one (Farmer) explicitly translates an African culture that is outside of her own experience. As students from a mainly white, middle-class, Canadian suburb, our participants had few life experiences to bring to these African texts and our assumption was that the students in the study would consider themselves as "dislocated" readers of these works. If they are on somewhat unsure cultural footing as readers, which mode of cultural translation might they prefer: the aggressive or the assimilative?

Ingrid: As a teacher educator of pre-service English teachers, I am constantly reading cross-cultural books for adolescent readers. Having lived and taught in South Africa for a number of years, I am particularly interested in books with an African setting, and in exploring how authors represent cultural perspectives in their writing. Recently, I have also become caught up in the debate over voice appropriation in texts and the whole question of "authenticity" in writing. While I appreciate and applaud the growing number of texts available in North America that have been written by authors "within" a culture, I have always believed that good writers should also be able to write about "someone else's" culture, provided they do so with sensitivity and insight. Writers have always written about experiences not their own; the ability to tell a good story is surely not limited to those who write about their own cultural perspective. Complicating the issue of cultural representation are questions about the transparency and fluidity of culture and language....

With these thoughts in mind, I began reading Nancy Farmer's novel, *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996) with anticipation and interest. Farmer is a white American author of young adult fiction who lived in Zimbabwe before moving to the United States, and she situates her writing in an African context. I had thoroughly enjoyed her previous novel *The Ear, The Eye and the Arm* (1994), an insightful and entertaining science fiction set in Zimbabwe of the future, and I expected to be similarly charmed by this subsequent novel which had recently been selected as a

Newbery honor book. *A Girl Named Disaster* contrasts a traditional Shona culture in Mozambique with a modern westernized society in contemporary Zimbabwe. Nhamo, the protagonist, is a young Shona girl who flees from her village when she is condemned to become the third wife of an old man. Nhamo's journey to Zimbabwe in a small boat is both an exploration of unfamiliar territory and a spiritual odyssey from one culture to another, as she leaves behind her familiar beliefs and traditions and prepares herself to live in a Westernized society with customs very different from her own.

There was much I liked about this novel on first reading, but I was also left with a vague sense of unease. As an adventure story, it succeeds in being exciting and engaging with interesting characters, but I wondered about the choices Farmer has made in her efforts to mediate an African culture for Western readers. She very consciously creates the setting of the book with maps of Nhamo's journey at the front of the novel and endnotes that relate the history and customs of the Shona people. She also provides a detailed glossary of Shona and Afrikaans words, most of which are also translated within the text. Little is left to readers' imagination as Shona culture is detailed and explicated through Nhamo's perspective. There appeared to me on first reading to be a naïve and unproblematic approach to translating culture in the book that takes no account of issues of power and representation that have been raised in our culturally-sensitive postcolonial era.

My discomfort increased with Farmer's emphasis on the "exotic" quality of Shona life through creating unfortunate comparisons with the "civilized" culture that Nhamo encounters in Zimbabwe in the last chapters of the novel. When Nhamo arrives, ill and exhausted, at an isolated research hospital, she is treated sympathetically while being somewhat effortlessly transformed into a westernized young woman. Sister Gladys, a nurse, teaches Nhamo "to buff her fingernails with a piece of leather" and provides her with "underpants" which she claims "civilized women" wear (267). Nhamo very quickly leaves behind the customs and traditions of the Shona people and settles into western ways, with "stylish new clothes, pink plastic sandals, and almost-emerald earrings in her newly pierced ears" (287). There is a sense in the book that culture is static, rather than a more fluid negotiation of identity through a multiplicity of discourses and experiences. In the dichotomy of

cultures described, Shona culture appears primitive and ritualistic, while western culture, in its colonial manifestation, appears civilized and multi-dimensional.

In pursuit of some confirmation of my unease, I collaborated with Jyoti, a teaching colleague, in a small study that asked high school students to do a blind reading of the first chapter of three African novels, including Farmer's novel, and to respond in writing to questions of language, voice and cultural translation. The second novel I selected, *The Bride Price (1976)*, was written by Buchi Emecheta, an Ibo from Nigeria who has lived much of her life in Britain. Emecheta lives and writes in the in-between spaces of African and European experiences. Her novel, *The Bride Price*, originally published in Britain in 1976, is currently in its sixth paperback printing in the United States. It is a love story of Aku-nna, a young Ibo girl, who falls in love with Chike, son of a prosperous former slave, and runs away from an arranged marriage to marry him. Her break with tribal custom and her uncle's refusal to accept the required bride price from Chike's family, contribute to Aku-nna's growing fear that she will be the victim of the fate decreed by tribal lore that she will die in childbirth. The third novel excerpt I asked students to read was from *'Buckingham Palace' District Six* (1986), written by Richard Rive, who grew up as a "coloured" person in apartheid South Africa. The book is a lively and poignant depiction of Rive's life in the now-famous District Six area of Cape Town which was razed during the apartheid era when it was declared for white occupation only. Rive's novel has been on high school reading lists in South Africa since the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994.

I asked students to read the first chapter of each book without any information about the writer, and then to comment on the intended audience for the book, on how the writer uses language to describe the particular African culture, and to speculate on the possible relationship of the author to the culture being described. I was interested in how students would be able to articulate their thoughts around issues of language, voice and culture in response to these three books, and to see if any of them shared my reservations about Farmer's book.

Jyoti: I was interested in this study because as a non-white teacher in a predominantly white school I have encountered a number of interesting questions regarding culture and literature. Primarily, I teach academic students in the International Baccalaureate programme and the cross-cultural focus of the IB curriculum allows me to pursue these issues with my students. Some of the questions I have struggled with arise from the community in which I

teach: a predominantly white, middle-class, Canadian suburb; consequently, many of my students seem to live in a privileged cultural "bubble" which they perceive as "normal," a perception which tends to be reinforced by our dominant culture. I ask myself regularly what I, as their English teacher, can do to encourage them to see beyond the space they presently occupy. Is their cultural myopia a result of their age? Will they grow out of it? I am not able to trust that the simple answer to these questions is "yes". What happens, then, when I attempt to introduce literature from outside of the Western European (read "normal") tradition? How do I prevent my students from falling into the trap of reading culturally diverse works as "representative" of the cultural background of the author? How do I build within my students the tools they need in order to be critical, evaluative readers?

Prior to this study, the grade eleven students involved had read a variety of novels in which our primary focus had been on establishing issues of translation, audience, voice, gender, and cultural appropriation and re-appropriation. The literature studied included: Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, and Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. While many of the pieces I have chosen are well-canonized in school curricula they all deal with very powerful questions of voice. I had hoped to engage my students in such a way that perhaps they could evaluate and consider issues of authorial voice and the construction of a reader's response to a work. Thus, one of my concerns as a teacher of literature has been how to help my students develop the skills, which will allow them to become perceptive and sensitive readers. In order for them to become the critical readers and thinkers I hoped for they needed vocabulary, strategies, and opportunities to examine issues of text and sub-text. I have also learned that perceptive readers respond well to challenging material, are able to focus on the author's craft, and thrive on discussion. As a result, the students who participated in this study were able to articulate some of the tensions and ambiguities they experienced with the excerpts they read.

Students' responses to these three novel extracts elicited a surprising level of agreement on particular issues of voice, language and culture. Without any information other than the fact that all of the works deal with Africa, the students were asked to read the opening chapters of the three novels and respond to the following questions for each of the three excerpts:

1. Do you think the author is an "insider" or an "outsider" to the culture they describe in the excerpt? What in the language of the excerpt makes you think so?

2. Who do you think is the author's intended audience? Is it children, young adults, or adults? Are they "insiders" or "outsiders" to the culture being described? What in the author's language choices makes you think so?

23 of the 25 students in this class suggested that Farmer's book, *A Girl Named Disaster*, was intended for young adults in Western countries. They supported this opinion with a variety of references to the way language is used in the text. One student explained:

> *I think the audience that the book is written for is Western, probably junior high. I think this because everyday activities are explained in the story, e.g. 'She prepared to grind the maize from yesterday. Nhamo used a flat, hollowed-out stone for a base and a smaller stone for a crusher.' If the story were meant for an African audience, such examples of culture would probably not be described in such detail.*

Other students offered similar comments, explaining that "*many African words are italicized - which would not be necessary for people of native African culture*" and "*words like 'hozi' are in italics, followed by a few words to translate so that we can relate.*" As one student commented, "*The author goes to a great effort to cram in as much culture as he or she possibly can rather than unconsciously incorporating it.*"

Even from their reading of the first chapter of the novel, most students demonstrated an awareness that an African culture is being "translated" for them in Farmer's book. However, only a few of them expressed any concerns about the level of didacticism such specific authorial direction might imply.

Asked whether or not they thought the writer of the book was "inside" or "outside" the culture being described, most students decided that Nancy Farmer is Western; they pointed to the particular care being taken to ensure readers were able to share her insights into Shona culture. One student suggested: "*I think the author is an outsider to the culture he/she is describing. I don't really know why. Perhaps because the words describing the culture seem too researched.*" Another student wrote:

> *An outsider wrote it for outsiders because [s]he exhibits a keen knowledge of what words need to be described and translated for outsiders. The author probably went into a great deal of research and probably worked or lived with insiders.*

Several students expressed unease about the way Farmer describes aspects of Shona culture. They appeared to detect a disturbing tendency of the author to unconsciously reinscribe the dialectic of good/evil, white/black, civilized/savage that permeated much colonial fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One student referred to this binary when she explained: *"The culture is described in a superficial manner, relating everything to a 'normal' counterpart."* Another commented:

> *There's a lack of much direct cultural reference here except for the story about the gods which was slanted in such a way that made [the characters] seem overly superstitious and paranoid and far more savage than their European counterparts.*

And one particularly articulate student observed:

> *The author is most likely an outsider. They have chosen to describe culture from behind a glass jar. Apparently we are made to see the culture as undesirable and primitive. In that, the fact this is written for children is disturbing.*

Comments from students in this grade eleven class as they responded to a blind reading of the first chapter of *The Bride Price* show interesting differences from their responses to *A Girl Named Disaster*. Almost all students commented on a contrast in tone and intent between Emecheta's novel and Farmer's book. They suggested that while Emecheta's novel might also have been written with teenage readers in mind, the language of the book was "*richer*" and "*more complex*," and that *"the author seems to know little, casual quirks about the culture and mentions them in colloquial language as it is perfectly normal to them."* More students were confused about the status of the writer of this book than they were about the Farmer novel. Several felt that the novel addressed a wider audience than Farmer's book. One student wrote: *"I think the book could be enjoyed by people of all cultures. It is more difficult to predict whether the author is an 'insider' or 'outsider.'* Another commented, *"Although the names of character suggest African culture, the writing has a distinct style that makes it hard to know."*

Many students, however, were adamant that the book "*is written for people of the Western culture to read*" and that "*the author is someone who has lived in the African culture all their life.*" One student explained this was *"because there is an unconscious incorporation of African culture into the novel,"* and another commented:

The author is an insider. Not many complex words are used; however, not many of the foreign words were explained. The author demonstrates a knowledge of the culture through English description of African culture.

Without knowing anything about Emecheta's background as a Nigerian writer who emigrated to Britain, students intuitively recognized the ambivalence of her position as a writer living between two cultures.

Little of this ambivalence was evident in student responses to the excerpt from the South African novel *'Buckingham Palace', District Six* which Rive based on his own experiences as a "coloured" person living through apartheid. Students all recognized that this text was written by an insider to a culture that was a colonized amalgam of African and British influences. One student commented that *"the author shows the influence that the English had over the Africans when he/she uses words such as "Buckingham Palace" and "King George"...these words give a feel of England, but in reality the town is far from it."* Another student wrote, *"I think this is written by an insider because of the way he melds all the contributing cultures into the total cultural mood of his city/town. The author has chosen to describe it as a mosaic of peoples and beliefs."* Students also demonstrated an awareness of a postcolonial perspective on culture with comments such as *"[the author] is showing other African cultures what British colonization can do to their culture[s]."*

As with the other texts, the students looked to the language of this excerpt in order to reinforce and articulate their understandings of the piece. Several students suggested that Rive's portrayal of this culture was far less self-conscious than Farmer's "construction" of culture in her writing. Although aware of the problematic nature of "authenticity," we noticed that many students commented on the seeming "naturalness" of Rive's writing. One student attempted to articulate this idea by saying *"[in the book] they discuss their culture in sporadic bits and it keeps back from the actual story."* Several students returned to the question of whose culture grounded each novel. This issue emerged in their responses to the question of where the authors were placed in relation to the culture being described in the texts. Students had little doubt that Farmer is situated as an "outsider" to the Shona culture, that Emecheta struggles with the ambivalence of a diasporic cultural perspective, and that Rive, while within the culture he portrays, recognizes its fractured nature. In contrast to the binary tensions students noticed in the

Farmer text, they showed an appreciation of the more fluid and multi-dimensional nature of culture as expressed by Rive. Perhaps students saw this fluidity as emerging from Rive's cultural situatedness, which was reflected in such observations as *"the culture is described as being only slightly important in comparison to life itself. However, it is presented as very normal, and as though the author is quite used to it."* Interestingly, no students made similar comments in response to the Farmer excerpt.

Perhaps we need to remain aware that comments on culture are difficult to separate from issues of literary quality. It may be that students' more positive responses to Rive's portrayal of a particular culture is a reflection of the literary quality of this text rather than his cultural location. This dilemma was illuminated in a student's observation that *"Although the language and attitude of the author is blasé and matter-of-fact, I can sense a rather careful melancholy in the tone."* Such comments remind us of the complexities of authorial voice and that it is often difficult to disentangle who an author is from their ability to write convincingly and evocatively.

In general, the students' responses to these particular works suggest that they were most satisfied with the texts in which the unfamiliar culture was presented as "normal" and not translated for them. They were least satisfied with the Farmer text, largely due to her explicit translation of Shona culture. Students responded positively when differences between cultures were allowed to emerge naturally rather than being explained in a didactic manner. They seemed to prefer the works in which unfamiliar cultural elements are presented in an "assimilative" manner but where the spaces of cultural difference are opened up and where "cultural differences are…made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work" (Tymoczko, 1999, p. 21). Rather than feeling themselves as dislocated readers of unfamiliar cultural texts, they saw these excerpts as sites of cultural exploration and learning. Our study suggests that students are not necessarily alienated when they read cross-cultural texts in which they may not be the intended audience. Our students were also clearly resistant to the explicit didacticism found in some literature intended for western audiences.

Contemporary authors face challenges in their abilities to straddle heightened cultural and literary expectations. Writers of cross-cultural literary texts with appeal to adolescent readers in the West face even further challenges in creating texts that are mediated for less experienced

readers and are sensitive in their portrayal of cultures that have traditionally been marginalized or stereotyped in literature of the past. These writers include both "insiders" of the culture being depicted and empathetic "outsiders." In each case, the writer provides a mediating voice between a reader and a perspective on a culture. Student responses to these three texts challenge the humanistic assumption that language can be used to "represent" cultures unproblematically and transparently. These adolescent readers demonstrated an awareness of how authorial voice both obscures and illuminates questions of culture and "authenticity". As young and relatively inexperienced readers they were nevertheless able to distinguish between text and sub-text, surface and under-current. In doing so, these readers were able to articulate ambiguities and tensions in how writers' intents can be undermined or reinforced by the cultural markers implicit in their writing.

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